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Professional Conduct

The way you conduct yourself as an environmental public health specialist has a profound impact on the working relationships you will establish with your customers. Gaining and maintaining the trust and respect of your customers while enforcing state and local laws, rules, and guidelines is a primary responsibility of an inspector.

Although you are obligated by law to perform regulatory duties as an environmental public health specialist and the owner/operator/manager is obligated to work with you, it should not be assumed that you have no obligation to consider customer satisfaction and ignore common business practices. Your role as an inspector will be made much easier by recognizing that everyone you meet at work is your customer; the owner or the manager of the facility, the citizens whose health you protect, as well as your co-workers who will have to read, interpret and process your paperwork.

Introductions

1. Upon entering an establishment, introduce yourself;
2. State who you are representing; and
3. State why you are there. You should do this verbally for every inspection.

An example: "Good morning, I am _____, with the _____ County Health Department. I am here to do your routine food safety inspection/annual lodging inspection/child care sanitation inspection. May I speak with the person-in-charge or manager?"

During this initial contact, you can review what your inspection will cover, you can ask for a tour if you have never been there before, you can invite the person you are speaking with to join you on the inspection, you can explain that when you are through you will review the inspection report findings and may require some of the violations to be corrected before you leave.

As you become more familiar with the owner or manager, your introduction will evolve. During the introduction, you may have a facility contact name that you can substitute for manager or person-in-charge. Although this person will never be your friend, it does not mean you should not be polite, pleasant and social. The degree with which you can "chat" or socialize with a manager will vary with facility and managers, so your technique and introduction will vary; you may be by the book in one place and casual in another.

In addition to verbally introducing yourself, remember you should give the person you meet a business card. The business card, in addition to being another form of introduction or identification, also allows the manager to contact you if they have questions about what your report documents.

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Appearance

Another important aspect of professional conduct is your appearance. As the “health inspector” you should consider that, in many instances, you are enforcing rules that require workers to have clean clothes, well-manicured fingernails and hair that is restrained. Your appearance should set the example for these standards.

Regardless of a dress code, in all instances you should wear a nametag that displays your name and the name of your employer and clean, well-maintained clothes and shoes that are appropriate for the work that you are doing. If your duties involve many different aspects of public health, you may need to adjust your schedule or bring along extra clothing for different work environments. For instance, muddy boots worn to conduct an onsite sewage evaluation should not be worn to conduct a food establishment, childcare facility, or hotel inspection.

Personal Safety

Some facilities may require you to wear items for your protection, such as: hard hats, steel-toed shoes/boots, eye protection, lab coats, etc.

Personal Health

Do not forget that your health can impact the health of the people you serve. You, yourself, could be a carrier for disease. If you are sneezing, coughing, or have diarrhea, you could spread illness while doing an inspection of a restaurant or childcare center. If you have a visible wound on your hand or arm, be sure to have it bandaged and consider wearing a glove.

Even if you are not ill, good hygiene on your part protects the customers of the facilities you inspect and/or visit. Set the example for good hygienic practices by washing your hands as soon as you enter a kitchen or childcare facility. By demonstrating disease controlling practices required of a facility, your customers will have more respect and understanding for them.

Effective Communication

It takes skill to discuss inspection findings, which can be negative, in a way that does not cause or escalate into conflict. There are many facets to successful communication. Effective communication involves not only what we say and how we say it but also what we are doing when we say it. To communicate effectively you will need to focus on verbal and non-verbal skills.

Let’s begin with a few non-verbal skills: smile, eye contact, handshake, nods, and body position. A firm non-aggressive handshake and eye contact with the manager when you are introducing yourself is one way to make a good impression. Smiling says you are friendly and all too often we forget that there is no harm in appearing happy and content. When discussing violations with a facility manager remember to stand in a manner that is not intimidating, do not back away, do not look around or down on the manager, do not clench your fists or point with your fingers, or stand with your hands on your hips.

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Part of effective communication is listening. It is important to work at listening; lean slightly towards the speaker, maintain eye contact and nod. Remember, their response may help you find a solution to the violations found. If you focus on hearing what is said and have respect for the opinions of the speaker, your job may get easier.

With respect to your verbal skills, remember that a few well-chosen words make a difference. Try not to use abbreviations or acronyms common to the environmental health field without first explaining them. The words you chose can make a positive difference and can have a tremendous impact on what is understood. Remember also that your tone of voice also effects how well you communicate. A loud voice may imply to the listener that you are angry and this may cause conflict. Use a tone of voice loud enough to be clearly heard or move your conversation to a quieter environment. Note that the listener may also conclude that if you speak with too soft a voice that you lack confidence and authority. Don't mumble! Practice talking in a voice that is clear and loud enough to be heard and understood.

Language barriers could exist when interacting with people whose native tongue is not the same as yours. You may need to adjust your communication style to convey your message effectively to them.

Although infrequent, conversations can become frightening, embarrassing and unpredictable if either party is "stressed-out", has a short fuse or a strong belief about the topic. Following are some ideas for avoiding heated exchanges or controlling the conversation and maintaining a productive dialogue. Begin by staying focused: do not back down but do not "fire back" or overreact to what is being said. It might be best to say nothing at all and just listen to what is said and then chose to respond. Fight the temptation to defend a belief or position or the need to be right. Try to find out why the person feels so strongly about a topic by asking why this is so important or of concern to them. When they answer, you may discover why there is such strong feelings and in doing so you can then redirect the conversation. Using these communication skills is always worth a try, however, if situations become hostile and bodily harm is threatened, fleeing to safety is the best tactic.

Most of your communication opportunities will be in the form of face-to-face activities during inspections. However, you will have ample opportunity to practice these techniques when speaking on the telephone. How you speak on the phone is as important as if you were meeting them in-person and, strangely enough, verbal and non-verbal skills still play a role. Remember to speak clearly and choose words that will be understood, smile, listen, and always pay attention to the caller.

Penmanship

The last aspect of conduct to discuss is penmanship. It involves not only readability from a neatness standpoint but from an accuracy standpoint. There are a few computer-based programs available that create a typed report based on the observations that an environmental public health specialist records, but for the most part, every environmental public health specialist documents

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the violations observed by writing. It is essential that the handwriting be neat and legible. If you cannot read your writing, chances are no one else can either.

Take the time to be neat and legible, do whatever it takes to produce a product that communicates to the owner and manager.

Equally important to neatness is correct spelling. Some commonly misspelled words include: ceiling, temperature, thermometer, sanitizer, lateral, wastewater, faucet, remediation, calibrating, quaternary, pamphlet, and visible. As with the penmanship, take your time, learn the words commonly used and write them neatly and accurately.

In all the things you do, you must always be professional and conduct yourself appropriately. You must be business-like, introduce yourself clearly and consider providing everyone with a business card, dress appropriately and be neat in appearance, produce a neat legible document of the inspection you conducted, as well as be knowledgeable and familiar with the codes you enforce. Use verbal and non-verbal communication skills that demonstrate your understanding, experiences and feelings. Remember, you are a professional with the important job of protecting public health.